

7 Christians Jailed for Refusing to Convert to ... Catholicism

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that seven Evangelical Christians in Chiapas, Mexico, were incarcerated on December 15 after refusing to convert to Catholicism. State and federal authorities had been informed of threats to illegally expel or incarcerate members of the Evangelical community weeks in advance but have refused to intervene.

The imprisonment comes as the culmination of an ultimatum that was given by local officials of Leyva Velazques, a municipality of Las Margaritas, Chiapas, to the local Evangelical community to convert to Catholicism, leave the village, or face prison.

According to Luis Herrera, Director of the Coordination of Christian Council of Churches, eight families in the village have succumbed to the ultimatum and signed documents indicating their conversion to Catholicism. Mexico's Constitution explicitly protects the right of all citizens to profess and practice the religious belief of their choice. The seven who are currently jailed have refused to convert.

In an interview with ICC, Jorge Lee Galindo, Director of Impulso 18, a human rights organization in Mexico City, said that for months the Christian community has been pressured to recant their faith or face expulsion from Leyva Velazques. At time of writing, ICC sources indicated that other Evangelical Christians in the community are continually being summoned before local officials in an effort to force them to renounce their faith.

This incident reflects a growing trend of religious persecution in rural areas of Mexico, as well as reluctance by

the state and federal government to protect religious minorities. In June, ICC estimated that more than 70 open cases of religious persecution against minority Christian communities, each involving between 20-100 victims, existed in the states of Chiapas, Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Puebla and Guerrero. On July 15, Senator Marco Rubio questioned Assistant Secretary of State Roberta Jacobson, the current nominee for U.S. ambassador to Mexico, on how she would address this issue.

Isaac Six, ICC's Advocacy Director, said "It is simply unconscionable for the state and federal governments of Mexico to repeatedly ignore the arbitrary arrest and expulsion of their own citizens by local governments on the basis of religious belief. We know that the federal government, as well as the State of Chiapas, was warned days in advance that the Evangelical community in Leyva Velazques was under threat, yet even after seven individuals were thrown in prison for their religious beliefs, action was not taken.

"This blatant abdication of responsibility has, for decades now, sent the message to rural villages across Mexico that if you have a problem with someone from another faith, you can simply force them to convert or leave. Today, hundreds of men, women, and children are homeless in Mexico because they chose to follow their beliefs, and because their government refused to act. We call on the federal government of Mexico to immediately intervene and halt the unlawful detention of members of the Evangelical community in Leyva Velazques."